

Specters of Inauthenticity

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"Custom"
misapplied
bastardised
murdered
a frankenstein
corpse
conveniently
recalled
to intimidate
women

Grace Mera Molisa, "Custom"

In the burgeoning literature on "tradition" both within the Pacific and without, there is a persistent specter of inauthenticity.¹ In the discourse of Pacific peoples and in the discourse of Western commentators, contrasts are made between true tradition and the invented artifact, between culture as a way of life as "simply living" and culture as a reified symbol of a way of life, between tradition as inheritance from the ancestors and tradition as the manipulative rhetoric of contemporary politicians. In this paper I offer a challenge to this dichotomy—first because a notion of true tradition entails a way of seeing Pacific cultures as unitary essences (cf, Handler and Linnekin 1984); second because it concords with a view of Pacific peoples as peoples without history before the West brought "social change," progress, and economic development (see Wolf 1982); and third because it equates unself-consciousness with authenticity (and by implication self-consciousness with inauthenticity).

First I testify to the pervasiveness of this dichotomy in some of the most

subtle and influential essays by Western commentators—Eric Hobsbawm's introduction to the collection he edited with Terence Ranger (1983), Alain Babadzan's overview of *kastom* and nation-building in the Pacific (1988), and Roger Keesing's several statements, including his earliest and his most recent (1982*a*; 1982*b*; 1989). The dichotomy is not present in a strong form in all of these works, and indeed Keesing's work develops a self-conscious reflection on it. But even where "real custom" is not essentialized or eternalized, authenticity can be equated with unself-consciousness.

Essentialist and dehistoricized views of culture have been much criticized. Also dispensable is the view of some cultures as unself-conscious, as being brought to self-awareness only by the outside agencies of colonialism or anthropological analysis. Otherwise the specter of inauthenticity will continue to haunt Western writings about Pacific peoples.

CUSTOM VERSUS TRADITION

Hobsbawm distinguishes sharply between tradition and "custom," which dominates so-called traditional societies. His notion of custom is not essentialist—he does not impute an unchanging custom to which primitive man (*sic*) is held to be a slave. Rather, "'custom' cannot afford to be invariant because even in 'traditional' societies life is not so" (1983, 2). According to Hobsbawm custom is flexible, admitting of variation and change up to a point—but that important difference is presented as if it were the same. In this it is different from invented traditions, which are characteristically invariant, employing fixed ritual routines or stereotypic symbols. Although the traditional societies of anthropological purview are alluded to by Hobsbawm, the examples of custom prominent in his work are taken from European history—from the realm of law and from peasant and labor movements. Customary law is what judges do (preeminently flexible despite the aura of precedent—cf Krygier 1988), while tradition subsists in the regalia of wigs, robes, and other features of court ritual.²

Although custom is not imputed to be invariant by Hobsbawm, it does seem to be unself-conscious. It takes an outside analyst to recognize the difference of past and present. Although peasants' customary claims to land from time immemorial reflect not historical facts but present political struggles, this important truth is known not so much to peasants them-

selves as to historians, “students of peasant movements” (1983, 2). Similarly, although workers may claim shop practices as the custom of the trade in perpetuity, students of the British labor movement know that this is not necessarily ancient tradition, but rights established in practical struggle. Unself-consciousness is associated with natural communities—self-consciousness with unnatural or “pseudo-communities (nations, countries)” (1983, 10).³ According to Hobsbawm, the bonds of the former are specific and strongly binding (the canonical rituals being rites of passage); those of the latter are vague about the values inculcated, but compulsory in the rites of patriotism (canonically singing anthems and saluting flags).

Although Hobsbawm is careful not to essentialize and eternalize traditional societies, he does draw a distinction between unself-conscious customs perpetuated by natural communities, such as villages, and self-conscious traditions invented by unnatural ones, namely nations and states. Such a contrast—the innocent villager as opposed to the cunning national politician, the romance of the natural village community as opposed to the unnatural claims of the state—is not unknown in contemporary depictions of Pacific polities.

KASTOM AS FOLKLORIC FALSITY AND DEVELOPMENT COMMODITY

This dichotomy between authentic custom and inauthentic *kastom* is most developed in an essay by Babadzan written for a conference held in 1983 but published (in a slightly revised form) in 1988. This essay was for its time quite path-breaking, in relating various Pacific meanings of tradition—*la coutume* in New Caledonia, *kastom* in Vanuatu, *fa’a Samoa* in Samoa and *peu ma’ohi* in Tahiti—to the trajectories of political independence and economic dependency in the region.

He cogently observes that political independence for the young nations of the Pacific has been paralleled by increasing economic dependence—on the former colonial powers, on transnational corporations, and on international monetary institutions. He sees aid and foreign investment as ultimately a source of trade and profits for the donors and investors, securing their political and strategic interests. Such “artificial economic development” has created an “overabundant stratum of native civil servants” (Babadzan 1988, 202) and indigenous capitalists on the one hand, and the dispossessed on the other—the landless, the proletarians, and the mi-

grants.⁴ He sees the process of commoditization as pervasive, extending even to culture. For Babadzan the irony is that tradition is no longer the practice of the rural masses but the rhetoric of the urban elites, “those most removed from traditional lifestyle and values and most involved in modernity” (1988, 206). The further paradox is that such celebration of tradition serves the interests of modernity, as it is promoted as a nationalist state ideology and as a development commodity (1988, 204).

He contends that although *kastom* is perforce a loose term, mobile between semantic contexts and promiscuous in its attachments, it is firmly grounded in its conjugation with modernity. These form a Manichaeic couple—dark versus light, archaism versus modernity, the Pacific versus the West. But he also implies bad faith in this coupling, for he suggests that the most Westernized social classes are now its most vigorous celebrants:

No one has forgotten that the relationship maintained only ten or twenty years ago by the bourgeoisie and urban elites with native cultures and with the rural milieu in general was marked with the interiorization—in varying degree—of Western racist discourse. Those who used to mock the backwardness of “savages” in the name of Progress and Civilization are now (verbally) the fiercest defenders of primitivity and archaic values. (Babadzan 1988, 206)

There has no doubt been a recent revaluation of *kastom* on the part of Pacific political elites in the interests of independence and nation building (though I doubt that the shift has been as categorical as Babadzan portrays it). What I question is the insinuation that such a change in political attitude is a sign of hypocrisy or inauthenticity.⁵

This particular instance of bad faith is a part of a wider process characterized in negative terms “fetishist reification,” “folkloricization,” “false criticism,” and “false apology” (Babadzan 1988, 206ff). In Babadzan’s Manichaeic couple both terms are reified. The West is reified in the symbol of the commodity; the consumption of imported goods is the canonical sign of perdition and alienation—despite the fact that “Western objects have been present in the Pacific ever since the voyages of Captain Cook, and that the peoples of Oceania have since then displayed a fund of energy and inventiveness to capture these fabulous . . . objects, without giving up their traditions” (but see Babadzan 1988, 207; Thomas 1991a). *Kastom* has also become a series of things—art objects, songs and dances, myths or exotic rites, the merchandise of folkloricism or tourism. These are not

only a disjointed set of signs, an assembly of unconnected cultural traits (opposed presumably to articulated and complete cultural wholes), but they are perforce exotic or picturesque—Pacific peoples have adopted the Western pursuit of alterity, becoming “other” to their own selves.

Although he is critical of Pacific peoples’ discriminations between authentic and inauthentic custom, Babadzan consistently makes a similar discrimination between true and false *kastom*. Festivals that assemble cultural elements from diverse places in a folkloric ensemble, that combine or creolize elements of the precolonial and the colonial emerge as projects of inauthenticity.

Thus *kastom* ideology celebrates as authentically *kastom* practices marked by decades of acculturation as well as practices rooted in tradition. Pagan songs and church hymns are put on the same plane in French Polynesia; in New Caledonia “art festivals” where *la coutume*, gagged by a century of colonialism, is supposed to thrive freely, begin with masses and religious hymns; in Vanuatu, since independence, *bislama* (a local variant of pidgin English) is referred to as a *kastom* language. (Babadzan 1988, 208)

But why shouldn’t church hymns, the mass, and *bislama* be seen as part of Pacific tradition, alongside pagan songs and indigenous languages? Hymns and church rituals have been significantly remade by Pacific peoples, so that Christianity may appear today as more quintessentially a Pacific than a Western faith. *Bislama*, though a lingua franca that emerged in the process of trade with Europeans, is not only grammatically an Austronesian language, but is perceived by ni-Vanuatu as *their* language of intergroup communication rather than that of Europeans (who are notorious for speaking it poorly). Perhaps it is not so much that Pacific peoples are glossing over differences in an indiscriminating valorization of precolonial and colonial strata of their past as that Pacific peoples are more accepting of both indigenous and exogenous elements as constituting *their* culture.

Although I endorse Babadzan’s plea for a historical understanding of the relationship between Pacific peoples and the West, I note that it is Western commentators who are more compelled to rigidly compartmentalize indigenous and exogenous, precolonial and colonial, because they retain an exoticized and dehistoricized view of Pacific cultures (see also Rowse 1988). They seem continually unable to deal with the conjunction and transformation of indigenous and exogenous elements in the creolized

cultures that now exist throughout the Pacific (Keesing and Jolly n.d.; Jolly n.d.a).

Babadzan is right to suggest that certain creolisms are more tolerated than others. Some political movements have been denigrated by those controlling Pacific states, including the John Frum and Nagriamel movements in Vanuatu, from the perspective of those in power immediately after independence; the prophet Tetua Mai and his followers in Tahiti, from the viewpoint of the powerful custodians of Polynesian culture. Similarly some innovations and Western motifs in Pacific artifacts are tolerated as creative, while others are denigrated as being attuned to touristic rather than ancestral values. Clearly such adjudications about which transformations are tolerable and which are worthless hybrids are eminently political judgments (cf, M. Allen 1982).

But Babadzan also exercises a political judgment in his stance about good and bad traditionalism. For him *kastom* is bad when it is orchestrated by the state or foreigners. The "cultural revival" in Gogodala is portrayed not as an authentic search for a lost past, but as a folkloricist revival legitimated by the state, Australian art-aid, and purveyors of traditional (rather than touristic) art works. I do not deny that the pursuit of local origins and the values of national progress and economic development were complicit in the construction of the Gogodalan Cultural Center and the revival of the Aida Maiyata ceremonies. The National Cultural Council funded the huge glossy art book that documented the exercise (Crawford 1981). But are the Gogodalans involved merely playing along with the ideologues from outside "to ape themselves, to produce an image of their culture that others in town have conceived as being relevant to their true identity" (Babadzan 1988, 220)? This representation seems to seriously underestimate both the enormity and seriousness of Gogodala cultural revival in the face of evangelical Christianity, and the degree to which this search for origins was an indigenous quest as well as an exogenous imposition (Crawford 1981).

Babadzan develops an analogous interpretation of the larger extravaganzas of national and regional festivals of Pacific arts—Melanesia 2000 held in New Caledonia in 1975, inspired largely by Tjibaou (Tjibaou 1978); the national and regional cultural festivals of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu; and the international South Pacific Arts Festivals, sponsored in part by UNESCO and aid money coming from Australia and elsewhere. These no doubt foster a collective cultural awareness that can fuel

national sentiments and movements for national liberation (witness Melanesia 2000). What I doubt, however, is that participating in such mass manifestations erases a sense of cultural specificity in favor of the nation, for as Babadzan himself admits, they may, like sports competitions, stimulate rivalrous regional sentiments. Moreover, I doubt that such spectacles simply deflect attention from the more telling issues of *kastom*—customary land tenure and political organization. This suggestion seems to give to such spectacles a magical efficacy, casting their participants as dupes, and their organizers as deluded charlatans.

The “cultural revitalization” that the state’s ideologists have in mind is a delusion. They do not intend to revitalize *as a whole* the cultural traits, practices, and institutions locally recognized as *kastom*, by helping them to survive and to be passed on. They are only interested in “revitalizing” . . . a very specific sector: local “artistic production.” For “Art” is seen today as endowed with the strange power to accomplish the redemption of culture. (Babadzan 1988, 216; emphasis in original)

Redemption through traditional art and making money go hand in hand, according to Babadzan, and proceed at the expense of real economic progress through land reform and agricultural self-reliance. Though land and agriculture are no doubt more crucial issues, they are not absent from the political programs of many Pacific states and Babadzan is unduly harsh in his views of both the economic and cultural returns of making artifacts, dismissing them as “a new kind of ergotherapy” (1988, 217).

Finally, Babadzan alludes to the way in which development is promoted not so much in contradiction to *kastom* but as conjoint with it. The rhetoric of good development, of development that is culturally sensitive, of modernization without Westernization, is proclaimed by the new bourgeoisie and groups that dominate the state. Such “customary modernism” functions as a “denial of dependence on the West, since it seeks to accredit the notion that it is possible to master, or even control it” (1988, 224). But is assuming “the mask of *kastom*” mere “pseudo-criticism” of the West because it is doomed to failure? While not denying that Pacific elites can often use *kastom* to further their economic and political interests, is it justifiable to see national projects of self-reliance as worthless, futile, and cynically self-interested endeavors? If this is the case at the national level, because the engulfing effects of the world system reduce all peripheries to

dependency, then why does Babadzan have such faith in the possibilities of self-reliance in the countryside? Again there appears to be a dichotomy between the charlatans in town and the authentic villagers.

ALTHOUGH Babadzan acutely identifies many processes in the politics of tradition in the Pacific, including the invidious dichotomy between true and invented custom, he himself employs it. His analysis is saturated with terms that imply falsity and inauthenticity. This language is not only unduly harsh in its political verdicts, but employs a disturbing certainty about the true path that Pacific peoples should follow. It is the language of a prescriptive outside analyst, who can see more clearly the contradictions between past and present, between precolonial and colonial, between archaism and modernity glossed over by those who blithely use that all-encompassing term, *kastom*.

COLONIALISM AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

In both his introduction to a pioneering volume and his own contribution on Malaita, Keesing points to the historical depth and the contextual expansiveness of *kastom* as a political symbol in Melanesia. He directs attention to the centrality of notions of tradition in the earlier history of anticolonial movements such as Maasina Rule in the Solomons and John Frum on Tanna. The anticolonialism of this earlier generation of "freedom fighters" was often minimized in European representations of them as mystical, millenarian movements or irrational cargo cults. The views "from the village and the views from the houses on the hill" (1982a, 298) contrasted sharply. Keesing views the gap between the new Melanesian inhabitants of the houses on the hill and the people in the villages as equally great. *Kastom* as political symbol is vague and vacuous enough to cover the distance between those "enclaves where ancestral custom and religion still govern everyday life" and those urban compounds inhabited by national politicians who "raised in urban settings and educated overseas proclaim the virtues of a *kastom* they have never known" (1982a, 299). Keesing does not here sustain a simple dichotomy between spurious *kastom* and genuine culture, indeed quite the opposite: "We err, I think, in imagining that spurious *kastom* is radically different to genuine culture, that the ideologues and ideologies of the post-colonial present had no counterparts in the precolonial past" (1982a, 301).

Although this cannot discriminate between past and present, it does seem that people occupy differentially authentic sites in the present (the village versus the town). Many other contributors to the volume, in particular Jolly (1982), echoed this view of *kastom* as a way of life and a political ideology in traditionalist villages being far removed from *kastom* as merely political symbol in the rhetoric of nationalist and secessionist movements. Moreover, most concurred with Keesing's view that colonialism was crucial in making people self-conscious about their culture.

What are the circumstances under which a people can take a sufficient (*sic*) external view of themselves and their way of life to see culture as a "thing" which they can proclaim adherence to, or reject? Perhaps it is only the circumstances of colonial invasion, where people have had to come to terms with their powerlessness and peripherality, that allow such externalization of culture as a symbol. (1982a, 300)

Without diminishing the significance of colonial invasion, I suggest that Pacific peoples were earlier aware of cultural difference. The difference about the colonial context, so aptly represented in much anthropological analysis, is in the degree of reification and idealization of culture and its prescriptive attachment to the "natives." If they are no longer doing "it" they are no longer themselves, whereas if colonizers are no longer doing what they were doing two decades ago, this is a comforting instance of Western progress. Diversity and change in one case connote inauthenticity, in the other the hallmarks of true Western civilization.

In Keesing's more recent statement (1989), a dichotomy between true and invented traditions persists, in subtle and self-conscious form. For instance, at one point Keesing talks of people "simply *living it*" (1989, 33; emphasis in original) in the precolonial past. But, Keesing with characteristic reflexivity is aware of the problem:

If I seem to imply a gulf between the authenticity of actual precolonial societies and cultures and the inauthenticity of the mythic pasts now being invented in the Pacific, such a characterization in fact perpetuates some of anthropology's own myths. The present political contexts in which talk of custom and ancestral ways goes on are of course very different from precolonial contexts. Nonetheless, such mystification is inherent in political processes, in all times and places. Spurious pasts and false histories were being promulgated in the Pacific long before Europeans arrived, as warrior leaders draped veils of legitimacy over acts of conquest, as leaders sought to validate, reinforce, institutionalize, and "celestialize" their powers. (Keesing 1989, 24)

Although this may be seen to dissolve the specter of inauthenticity only by representing it as a much more ancient ghost, Keesing here points clearly to how authenticity is associated with the anthropological myth of culture as a harmonic whole. As he rightly points out, Pacific cultures, no less than earlier European cultures, were characterized by different and contesting interests—of men and women, chiefs and commoners—in varying degrees in different parts of the Pacific. Such divergent interests were often involved in the political transformations observable in the dynamism of Pacific prehistory. Pacific cultures have surely not been perpetuating themselves “out of time” but have manifest processes of rapid change in processes of expansion and contraction of hierarchical regimes, for instance (Thomas 1989, Jolly n.d.b).

Although Keesing recognizes the conflict and the change inherent in precolonial cultures, he still lays too much stress on colonialism in creating cultural self-consciousness. Following Gramsci (1971) and Guha (1983) he sees Pacific self-awareness precipitated out of the colonial encounter, consciousness attained through wrestling with the other. The arrival of Europeans no doubt pushed a sense of cultural difference and of cultural alternatives in qualitatively new directions (cf, Lindstrom 1982a, 1982b).⁶

When massively confronted with an engulfing or technologically dominating force—whether early colonial invaders or more recently the world capitalist system and late-twentieth-century technology and wealth—one is led to take an objectified, externalized view of one’s way of life that would hardly be possible if one were simply *living* it. (Keesing 1989, 33)

But is anyone, anywhere, anytime “simply living” their culture without an awareness of cultural alternatives? Perhaps it is another Western myth to credit Westerners with the knowledge of difference, and others with the lack of such knowledge. The diversity and insularity of the precolonial Pacific did not imply cultural insularity, as Keesing himself has stressed elsewhere (Keesing 1981, 111–120; cf, Linnekin and Poyer 1990). Linguistic and cultural differences were precipitated out of contact as much as separate development (see Tryon 1989). Trade and ritual exchange in the Pacific often depended on amplifying differences of ecological niche, productive specialism, and cultural styles (J. Allen 1982; Macintyre and Young 1982).

In these precolonial processes of intercultural communication, bits of cultures—artifacts, dances, songs—were often used apart from the cul-

tures themselves. There was much ritual borrowing whereby songs and dances from one region were performed elsewhere, in a way that drew attention to their foreign origins and emphasized their exotic nature. For instance in precolonial Vanuatu, songs imported from elsewhere were often sung in a foreign language rather than being translated, dance styles were named for their place of origin long after they were purchased, sculptural styles for ceremonial figures were known as emanating from a certain place and might be exchanged or bought (see Layard 1942, 115, 312, 318; Jolly 1991a, 51). In precolonial polities such differences were rarely ranged as an entire folkloric ensemble, nor were material items or ritual forms taken to be icons of cultural wholes, but there was still self-consciousness of one's language, of one's way of life as not being the one, the only way to live (cf, Linnekin and Poyer 1990). It is perhaps Western and anthropological presumption to insist that Westerners delivered to Pacific peoples a novel sense of cultural awareness (although they may have delivered the myth of culture as reified whole).⁷

It is important to distinguish between an awareness of difference, the attribution of that difference to something called culture, and the process whereby culture is objectified and substantivized as a unitary essence. Linnekin has, over a series of important contributions, disentangled these processes (1983, 1991a; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Linnekin and Poyer 1990). Writing with Handler (1984), she suggests that tradition is never an inert object, an inheritance passively passed from one generation to the next, but is always a symbolic constitution of the past in the present. It entails continual recreation rather than passive perpetuation or "invention." It is always in some measure self-conscious—even when it seems to be unself-conscious, naive inheritance. Both for Quebec and Hawai'i, Handler and Linnekin query an image of a preexisting rural or folk society where traditions were unreflectively handed down in unchanging form (1984, 281, 285).

As well as stressing self-awareness in time, Linnekin posits self-consciousness in Pacific cultural space. She and Poyer explore the indigenous idioms of difference in the Pacific. They posit a contrast between Pacific and European constructs in terms of a genetic analogy—Lamarckian versus Mendelian. Indigenous Pacific constructs of cultural identity are permeable, situational, and shifting; shared identity derives from the shared experience of the environment, or shared behavior rather than shared substance. Western constructs of ethnicity on the other hand create mutually

bounded, stable entities based on ideas of innate shared substance—blood or seed (Linnekin and Poyer 1990, 7–9). But they suggest that in the contemporary Pacific there is a continuum between these polar types because of the variable impact of colonialism and the varying degrees to which indigenous patterns of group ascription have been influenced toward Western ethnic constructs. They suggest that Pacific peoples living as minorities in states—Hawaiians, Maori, and Australian Aborigines—have perhaps moved closest to ethnic identity on a Western model (1990, 12).⁸

Linnekin considers whether this is an instrumental change at the level of political discourse or a sign of thoroughgoing change in Oceanic conceptual modes (1990, 149). She is equivocal but ultimately opts for the position that Pacific peoples have assimilated a Western concept of culture and culture has increasingly become externalized as a symbol. Like Keesing, she suggests that this process of externalization is intimately related to the process of colonization. But she also stresses that self-consciousness of difference preceded the internalization of this Western concept of culture and its externalization as a symbol in political struggles with European others.

Colonization of the Pacific did not originate with Europeans—indeed the entire process of Austronesian expansion in the Pacific has been viewed as a colonizing process (eg, Bellwood 1989). Moreover there were indigenous examples of conquest or expansion, such as the hegemony of the Iatmul in the Sepik (Gewertz 1983) or the influence of Tongans in the eastern islands of Fiji. But the encounter with Europeans presented an encroaching culture that was not only very different, but with historical agents who had both the intentionality and the power to effect changes in Pacific cultures.

From early contact the presence of Europeans created a more intense self-consciousness about what was distinctively indigenous. This sometimes entailed a positive defense of tradition but often a rejection or negation of it. Thomas has suggested in a recent paper (n.d.) that the inversion of tradition is perhaps more crucial than its celebration in the historical emergence of objectification. This was most abundantly clear in the effects of Christian missionaries, who in varying degrees required that Pacific peoples detach themselves from their past practices and treat the past as a time of darkness prior to the coming of the light of Christianity (eg, Jolly 1991*b*). In this process certain features of past practices became

iconic of the whole—variously cannibalism, warfare, sorcery, widow strangulation, bride-price, kava drinking, pig breeding. The process of conversion required the rejection of such practices as heathen or barbaric. In this way “custom” was objectified—a thing that could be detached from indigenous actors and left behind. Christian missionaries were in many places the earliest and most zealous of the colonial agents who created the conditions for the externalization of Pacific culture as a symbol. But economic and political colonial processes no less precipitated an intense self-awareness about culture.

Otto has documented the crucial role of the labor trade in this process on Baluan (1991a; 1991b). The experiences of many young men on distant plantations exposed them not only to the alien culture of powerful and wealthy Europeans, but also to the foreign cultures of other Melanesians. This precipitated two divergent processes—an awareness of differences between indigenous peoples, and awareness of their fundamental similarity in opposition to the ways of whites. In the words of Paliau, the famous leader of the Manus movement that bears his name,

I found that I didn't like the way of life of the Admiralties. I could never go back. But when I went to Rabaul it was the same as the Admiralties. I left Rabaul and went to Salamoia. It was the same there. I went as a policeman to Madang. It was just the same. I went to Finschaven and observed the customs of the natives there. It was again the same. Lae, also and Kavieng were the same. Then I thought, our cultures are of only one kind. (Schwartz 1962, 242, cited in Otto 1991b, 6)

In particular Paliau thought they were alike in requiring profligate feasts and wasting resources. In the movement he developed, custom thus became objectified as *kastam*. In its earlier phases this was a negative value, since the movement was both anticolonial and antitraditional. More recent manifestations of the movement as Makasol have revived *kastam* as a positive value (Otto 1991b; n.d.). Similar historical shifts from the devaluation to the revaluation of tradition have been reported from many other parts of Melanesia (eg, for Vanuatu see Jupp 1982; Larcom 1982, 1990; Lindstrom 1982b; Philibert 1986; Tonkinson 1982a, 1982b). Of central importance is the articulation between local and national revaluations of tradition. Anthropologists have tended to endorse the former and adopt a more critical stance toward the latter.

THE POLITICS OF PASTS AND PRESENTS

In his most recent statement Keesing has considered the politics of Western scholars representing "tradition" in the Pacific:

Scholars of Pacific cultures and history who are sympathetic to these political struggles and quests for identity are in a curious and contradiction-ridden position in relation to these emerging ideologies of the past. The ancestral ways of life being evoked rhetorically may bear little relation to those documented historically, recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archaeologically—yet their symbolic power and political force are undeniable. (1989, 19)

Perhaps, he ponders, it matters less whether these pasts are mythical or real, but whether they are being used to liberate or oppress, to recapture just rights or deny them. This is a good move, since adjudications about what constitutes oppression or justice are patently political in a way judgments about myth and reality are not.

Keesing's paper directly addresses the problematic roles of Western analysts. Why should Western scholars get involved in a study of the politics of tradition in the Pacific at all? It is fraught with philosophical and political hazards. Even complicated exercises in deconstruction by anthropologists may be read by Pacific peoples and by popular commentators as claims about false traditions (witness the recent debates in newspapers in New York, Australia, and New Zealand about Hanson's recent analysis of Maori traditions in the *American Anthropologist* [Hanson 1989; Nissen 1990; Wilford 1990; *The Australian*, 26 February 1990; Linnekin 1991a]).⁹

Keesing offers an implicit defense in that Pacific anticolonialism and nationalism are in many ways derived from Western discourse—its semiology is contained by the hegemonic discourse it opposes, the elements of tradition celebrated are precisely those that differentiate Pacific from European, and its promulgators, Western educated-elites, have been exposed to and interiorized Western values, in particular the opposed terms of *progress* versus *nature*, *development* versus the *environment* in Western political philosophy.

Another more explicit defense is that the past is always contested ground (cf, Thomas 1991b) and that outsiders may urge Pacific peoples to critical contestations of hegemonic pasts perpetuated by those in power. This suggests academics should enter such contests on the side of the powerless, to disturb hegemonic history. But this raises the strategic problem

of assessing who is empowered and who is not, who is promoting justice and who is not. Cultural nationalism is being promoted by Pacific peoples in vastly different political circumstances—indigenous minorities struggling for sovereignty within states controlled by others, clear majorities in politically independent but economically dependent states, an indigenous group vying with another ethnic group for control of the state, and dispersed populations brought together in new federated, pluralistic nations. Presumably the nature, the efficacy, and if we dare judge it the justice of cultural nationalism must be assessed in terms of such very different contexts.¹⁰

The danger Keesing presents of Pacific peoples relinquishing their history to the experts seems to me more remote than the reverse—the danger of Western scholars being denied the right to talk, not just as authoritative experts, but to talk at all.

Keesing defends scholars' right to speak in these terms:

But specialists on the Pacific do not best serve the interests of a less hegemonic scholarship or best support the political struggles of decolonizing and internally colonized Pacific peoples by suspending their critical judgment or maintaining silence—whether out of liberal guilt or political commitment—regarding mythic pasts evoked in cultural nationalist rhetoric. Our constructions of real pasts are not sacrosanct, but they are important elements in a continuing dialogue and dialectic. (Keesing 1989, 37)

My argument is not that scholars should maintain silence, or I would not be speaking at all. But I do think we should be careful of what we say in what contexts. This does not imply a suspension of critical judgment, but avoiding a style of writing that presumes Western scholars have the truths and Pacific politicians are perpetrating illusions or self-delusions. I doubt that scholars any more than Pacific peoples can tell “real pasts.” In constructing histories we should make them relational, that is acknowledge the historical situatedness of Pacific peoples and of Western commentators in discourses about the Pacific. In reconstructing pasts the colonizing and decolonizing relation might be the center and not just the context of analysis (see Jolly n.d.c).

Rather than presenting our accounts as real pasts, Western scholars might look more carefully and comparatively at the encoding of past-present relations in the variety of symbolic constitutions of tradition. Then our questions might cease to be those of persistence versus inven-

tion, or of whether tradition is genuine or spurious. We probably cannot readily resolve the political conundrums about whether and when to speak and write about Pacific traditions. But we might at least stop using the language of inauthenticity.

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Notes

The lines from the poem "Custom" by Grace Mera Molisa are reproduced, with permission, from page 24 of her volume *Black Stone* (Suva: Mana Publications, 1983).

1 The huge literature on the invention of culture and the politics of tradition is more than I can deal with here, but for a broader review see Linnekin (n.d.). As she notes there was a simultaneous emergence of the concept both in general works of European and colonial history (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and in the anthropology and history of the Pacific (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Linnekin 1983). Prior to this there was a prescient Pacific antecedent in the work of Peter France on Fiji (1969), and a brilliant theoretical precursor in Roy Wagner's *The Invention of Culture* (1975), which examined the creation of culture on the part of both anthropologists and the people they study. Subsequently there has been a host of other relevant works, too numerous to catalogue here. But as Linnekin argues, although "the invention of tradition" is a zeitgeist of our times it is, like culture, contextually created and contested. Beyond history and anthropology there has been some interrogation of the concept in law (eg, Krygier 1988;

Aleck 1991) and in the social sciences more generally (eg, Eisenstadt 1973; Shils 1981).

2 Krygier (1988) offers a subtle and interesting reflection on the concept of tradition as it relates to the law, and in particular common law. See also Aleck's excellent work on law and custom in Papua New Guinea (1991).

3 Compare Anderson's critical remarks on Gellner's theory of nationalism, "Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates invention to 'fabrication' and 'falsity' rather than to 'imagining' and 'creation' " (1983, 15). A similar point about the specters of authenticity has been made by Beckett, Cowlshaw, and Rowse in their reflections on the construction of Aboriginality in Australia (see their contributions in Beckett 1988).

4 Here and elsewhere Babadzan tends to generalize and to overdramatize the processes of change and development. One could argue on the contrary that one of the distinctive features of the Pacific, in contrast to Africa, Asia, and South America, is the fact that few indigenous people are landless, that proletarianization has been relatively slight, and that the process of emigration both within the region and beyond has not been primarily a response to dispossession or poverty. Such processes are observable in certain islands of Micronesia and Polynesia, and less so Melanesia, but cannot be advanced as typical of the entire region.

5 Although we might often accuse our politicians of hypocrisy we rarely accuse them of inauthenticity. A commensurate shift in political philosophy, for example, about the environment might rather be taken as a sign of progress or change. There are probably many reasons why anthropologists have fixated so harshly on the political elites of the Pacific—as inauthentic proponents of *kastom*. First, there is no doubt that having concentrated attentions on remote villagers anthropologists are predisposed to see their life experiences as more interesting and authentic than those of persons living in towns. Second, national political elites, insofar as they are constructing unity from diversity, are engaged in projects of trying to represent and encompass, in a way perhaps parallel to Western scholarship. Finally, these are the very people, rather than rural intimates and village friends, who have sometimes refused anthropologists' rights to represent, who have denied them or their graduate scholars easy access to old field sites, and who have challenged not just their hegemonic authority but their right to speak about the Pacific.

6 Lindstrom employs dramatic organicist metaphors in his reflections on the impact of colonialism on ni-Vanuatu self-consciousness about their culture. In one paper he compares the process to a fish being taken out of water and suddenly becoming aware of it (1982a, 316–317), and in another he compares a self-

consciousness about culture to "the reborn monster of Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein" who "experienced not simply life but an anguished consciousness of what it means to be alive, so is culture, born again as *kastom*, no longer an unreflexive shared knowledge which patterns social behavior but the conscious knowledge of that knowledge" (1982b, 234).

7 The notion of culture as a unitary whole has a fairly recent lineage within anthropology, perhaps dating back only to the functionalism and structural functionalism of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in the 1920s and 1930s. Their unitary and organicist conception of culture or society opposed the culture concept in diffusionism, evolutionism, and historical particularism, which they dismissed as constructed of "shreds and patches," of elements from other places (borrowings) or time (survivals) (see Harris 1968). Anthropological theory is perhaps returning to this polymorphous, even motley, conception of culture (Clifford 1988). Pacific Islanders have borrowed the concept not just from anthropologists, but from missionaries, administrators, educationists, and development agents. Concepts of culture employed by Pacific peoples may be more or less totalizing, embracing the region, a nation, a province, or a village, depending on context and political motivation (see Keesing 1989).

8 However, they do not chart "an ineluctable transition from Lamarckian to Mendelian premises about identity" (Linnekin and Poyer 1990, 12) and they also observe the reverse phenomenon: that in Hawai'i and New Zealand at least Oceanic models of cultural identity have begun to penetrate the institutions and the bureaucracy of the dominant society. I have some difficulty in accepting that all indigenous ascriptions of cultural identity were Lamarckian. Perhaps there was a range between Lamarckian and Mendelian constructs or, to use another language, between circumstantialist and primordialist constructions of identity prior to the introduction of Western constructs of ethnicity (see also Norton 1991). This must remain speculative, since it is extremely hazardous to reconstruct earlier constructs of group identity from contemporary manifestations. As Linnekin wryly observes "no anthropologist has ever worked in a precontact society and none ever will" (1990, 170).

9 Linnekin (1991) also notes that Hanson's paper received a more sympathetic reading in the *New York Review of Books* than in the several articles in the New Zealand and Australian press, which is not surprising. See also Trask's paper (1991) and the responses by Keesing (1991) and Linnekin (1991b) in the pages of this journal.

10 Keesing admits to the difficulties of such adjudications in a more recent statement, "Just causes including those of cultural nationalism are seldom simply and unequivocally just." He suggests that claims for ethnic separatism and secession may seem just in terms of a past history of oppression, but that to translate

sympathy into concrete support may yield a world "broken into unviable pieces," a balkanized world where the pieces may be even more vulnerable than composite nation-states. But he also maintains that to suspend "critical judgments and scholarly scepticism in the name of just causes may in the long run do those causes an injustice. . . . Ideologies, of cultural nationalism as of other causes, are in the end stronger if they do not rest on mythic foundations" (Keesing 1990, 23-24).

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